DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 200 639 TM 810 233

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TITLE The National Diffusion Network: A Network Assisting Schools to Adopt Exemplary Programs.
PUB DATE 13 Apr 81
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (65th, Los Angeles, CA, April 13-17, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Federal Programs; *Program Descriptions; Program Effectiveness
IDENTIFIERS *National Diffusion Network

ABSTRACT

Established in 1974, the National Diffusion Network (NDN) is a diffuse association of primarily school-based instructional or other education programs that have been approved for nationwide dissemination by a federal panel, the Joint Dissemination Review Panel (JDRP). Five principles of NDN are: (1) those who develop a program are best qualified to demonstrate it to others; (2) whatever is to be demonstrated and shared must represent quality; (3) a diversity of offerings should be available; (4) informal structure, lateral communication, and a philosophy of mutual help among coequal projects are more effective than a highly structured organization; and (5) money is needed if demonstration and dissemination are to be carried out. With JDRP approval, a project automatically is part of the NDN and is described in its annual catalogue, Educational Programs That Work. Results of studies are presented to support NDN's past effectiveness. Looking toward the future, questions relating to the following topics are raised: (1) financial survival; (2) number of projects to be supported; (3) projects to be supported number of project adoptions; (4) NDN growth; and (5) ultimate effect of the new requirement that all JDRP-approved projects must resubmit every four years in order to remain in the NDN. (RL)

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A NETWORK ASSISTING SCHOOLS TO ADOPT EXEMPLARY PROGRAMS

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Prepared for American Educational Research Association session, "Comparative Analysis of Federally Funded Dissemination Strategies," April 13, 1981.

THE NATIONAL DIFFUSION NETWORK
A NETWORK ASSISTING SCHOOLS TO ADOPT EXEMPLARY PROGRAMS

by

Diane H. McIntyre

Established in 1974, the National Diffusion Network precedes other dissemination systems by several years. Familiarly known as the NDN, this system is a diffuse association of primarily school-based instructional or other education programs that have been approved for nationwide dissemination by a federal panel.

How did the NDN come about? By the early 1970s, through Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and other legislative initiatives, the federal government had pumped millions of dollars into schools across the country to develop programs to suit local conditions. In most cases, the results, and the federal money, helped only the students in the school or district that received the federal grant. There was, however, good reason to believe that a program found to be effective in one school or district could be equally effective elsewhere. In 1974 this belief led to the creation of the National Diffusion Network with discretionary funds made available by then Commissioner of Education Terrel Bell.

The idea behind the National Diffusion Network and the policy that has guided it are simple: establishment of a mechanism for sharing successful education practices that can prevent repetitive development costs for similar programs in many locations. And -- let's be frank and admit it -- part of the idea was to formalize a means of putting on display for the Congress the "goods" purchased with the taxpayers' money that its members had authorized to be spent. One of the major NDN principles, then, is that of getting mileage out of one's money by working from example and by sharing success.

What are the other operating -- albeit uncodified -- principles of the NDN?

First, those who develop a program are best qualified to demonstrate it to others.

Second, whatever is to be demonstrated and shared must represent quality.

Third, for a diverse country with many different problems, a diversity of offerings should be available.

Fourth, informal structure, lateral communication, and a philosophy of mutual help among coequal projects are more effective than a highly structured organization.

Fifth, money is needed if demonstration and dissemination are to be carried out.

And sixth, cooperation with other major federal programs can make it possible for financially strapped schools to solve some of their problems by applying, for example, ESEA Title I or Title IV-C money to adoption of an NDN program. (The average cost of adopting an NDN program is $5,000.)

What are the successful education practices that these principles support? At the core of the NDN is the special group of locally developed education programs approved by the federal Joint Dissemination Review Panel -- 76 in 1974, the NDN's first year, 286 in February 1981. These projects are called Developer/Demonstrators. That is, the staff responsible for developing a program become responsible for demonstrating its merits and operation to others. The Joint Dissemination Review Panel can be considered a quality-control mechanism. By reviewing the data that a project submits to support its claims for the effectiveness of its program, the JDRP screens out projects whose claims are determined to be inadequate to receive the Department of Education's endorsement as suitable for national dissemination. Every project submitting to the JDRP must supply data that answer these questions: Do you have evidence that positive change has occurred as a result of the program's activity? Has the evidence supporting the claims been gathered and interpreted correctly? Is the change statistically significant? Is the change educationally significant? Can the change justify the expense? And perhaps most interesting, can the program be used in other locations with comparable impact? Since it was established in 1972, the JDRP has reviewed the claims of 465 projects and approved approximately 60 percent. With JDRP approval, a project automatically is part of the NDN and is described in the widely used annual NDN catalogue, Educational Programs That Work.

The range of programs represented by the NDN is comprehensive -- everything from basic adult education to program planning for administrators. Offerings are as diverse as training for teachers of cerbral palsied infants, a multitude of basic skills programs, and an efficient means of tracking health insurance for school employees. Where do these programs come from? Initially the NDN represented primarily ESEA Title III projects. (Title III, now replaced by Title IV-C, was the authorization for channeling of federal funds through the states to local school districts to develop programs for their own purposes.) Now, however, there are programs whose development was funded by a variety of federal agencies, including the Office of Special Education, ESEA Title I, Bureau of Adult Education, National Science Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Humanities, to name just a few. And just recently, the regulations for submission to the JDRP have been expanded to permit application by projects funded by a variety of sources, with the exception of propriety projects and products. This modification will undoubtly lead to still greater diversity.

However, diversity does not invite a tight structure. Informal organization has always characterized the NDN. As I implied at the outset, this is a loose network in which communication is lateral, and its members hold an intense belief in the principle of coequal projects helping each other with their common problems of dissemination. This belief is strongly supported and encouraged by the National Diffusion Network Division, the federal agency that sponsors the NDN.

How does this loose association of diverse projects work? I think of the NDN as a five-part system, one part of which is the National Diffusion Network Division. Although the name of this agency and its home within the federal bureaucracy have changed several times in the eight years of the NDN's existence, many of the staff responsible for creating the network have remained active, shepherding its growth and encouraging diversity and experimentation. They have maintained a flexible approach and avoided mandates on day-to-day operations. This policy has resulted in cooperation at local and state levels in support of program improvement, since it allows the staff of the individual NDN projects to decide on their own how to handle each of the many, very different situations that they must face in the course of their work.

Another part of the five-part system is that represented by the Developer/Demonstrators, the JDRP-approved projects that have applied for and been granted special NDN funds for dissemination. Although JDRP approval means entry into the NDN, it does not guarantee dissemination funding. That money is limited. For the 1980 fiscal year, 112 of the JDRP-approved projects have received small 12-month grants averaging $37,500. (In addition, 21 JDRP-approved projects receive dissemination money from the Follow Through office, and 16 from the Office of Special Education.)

State Facilitators form a third part of the NDN. They work with schools and institutions to clearly define any education problems those institutions have identified, determine which NDN programs have the potential of solving the problems, and help with formal adoption of the appropriate program, including support for its operation and evaluation of its progress in the new locale. Currently the National Diffusion Network Division supports a facilitator operation in every state but Wyoming, as well as in the District of Columbia and the Virgin Islands. Facilitators are funded through state departments, local school districts, and private nonprofit companies. Some are just one-person offices, others are part of established state information networks. A few states even have regional facilitators.

A fourth element of the NDN is its technical assistance system. In the early days there was no support system, but as the network grew it began to need a means of communication for Developer/Demonstrators and Facilitators and assistance in building skill in dissemination. The technical assistance system born in 1975 has expanded to include a wide variety of materials for and about the NDN and comprehensive direct services to both groups and individuals among the many NDN projects.

A last, far more diffuse, and far less formalized part of the NDN is the multitude of schools, school districts, and other institutions that have decided to adopt -- that is, put into practice in their own locale -- an NDN program. Adopters are hard to define and they exist all over, from rural outpost schools in Alaska to large cities, like New York and Los Angeles, and to suburbs, small cities, and mountain communities. They represent both public and private schools. Some adopters are schools with a program in just one classroom; others are districts with thousands of students. Some adopt one NDN program, others several. They may not know that they are an NDN adopter, but in the final analysis they are what the NDN is all about: the

sharing of an exemplary practice with others, at minimal cost.

To summarize, let me cite the 1978 synthesis of studies on five education dissemination systems by Emrick and Peterson, who list six assumptions on which both policy and operation of the National Diffusion Network are based:

First, fundamental to the NDN is the emphasis not on "information science technology" but on people to stimulate interest and to engineer change.

Second, within the NDN school change is viewed as a process.

Third, Facilitators help Developer/Demonstrators by acting as change agents.

Fourth, demonstration is vital to the process that leads ultimately to adoption and change.

Fifth, adaptation of features that are not considered "core elements" of Developer/Demonstrator programs is to be expected.

Sixth, a variety of materials should be available to make adoptions possible, from initial awareness through training and implementation. But materials are not adequate by themselves; people are needed.

Let me turn now to the effectiveness of the NDN. Has the concept of a loose network of diverse people and projects been successful, and can the result stand as a model for other dissemination systems in the planning stages? From 1975 to 1977 Stanford Research Institute conducted an in-depth evaluation of the NDN sponsored by the United States Office of Education. In analyzing the NDN approach to dissemination, the investigators concluded that the emphasis on interpersonal operations was the network's most significant characteristic and the one most responsible for producing change. Of the almost 1,500 school districts across the country that were surveyed, 80 percent claimed that they had successfully implemented and were pleased with the success of the NDN program or programs they had adopted. Nine out of 10 adopters of NDN programs reported that the programs were filling needs, that they were working well, that they were a clear improvement over previous practices, and that on the average they had cost their districts less than $2,000. The SRI study indicated that the NDN had been very successful in creating awareness of its programs and services, in stimulating interest and action on the part of school personnel, and in providing schools with materials, training, and follow-up help.

A soon-to-be-released study organized by The NETWORK, Inc. and sponsored by the Department of Education's Office of Program Evaluation has examined a broad spectrum of federal and state dissemination activities, among them the National Diffusion Network, at four levels -- federal, state, external agent, and local. Although the preliminary results of this study are being reported at another session of this conference, I would like to summarize two major findings with respect to the National Diffusion Network.

One of the most interesting questions asked during the study concerned

the extent to which and how well new programs or practices that benefit from dissemination are actually put into practice in adopting schools. The researchers developed "component configuration checklists" that could be used to break each innovation being studied into its principal elements. Among the NDN adopters surveyed, an average of 75 percent of the adopting program elements were operating successfully, and each program had from five to 12 elements, most more than 10.

In answer to the question "how much change in educational practices actually takes place as a result" of an adoption, this same study found that "92 percent of the respondents intend to maintain their use of the practice or expand it to other classes," 71 percent stated that their adoption had attained all of the goals they had set for it, and another 9 percent said that the adoption had partially achieved what the adopters had set out to achieve.

Additional evidence of effectiveness comes from an investigation of the National Diffusion Network that was conducted recently by the House Subcommittee on Appropriations. The investigators reported positive findings and concluded that the NDN was an effective dissemination system. They indicated, however, that its effectiveness could be increased by greater use of certified trainers and by more services to adopters.

I believe we can fairly conclude that the organizing concept and operations of the NDN have resulted in success and that the NDN has accomplished to a large degree its goal of program and school improvement at minimal cost. But where do we go from here? At this juncture, the NDN has several questions to answer. I am confident that if the principal question is answered -- that of survival in financial terms -- answers to the others will fall into place.

The question of financial survival is not new to the NDN. At one time the network existed with no funding at all for 12 months. But, for reasons that we are all intensely aware of, it is a more serious consideration now than in the past. Unlike some federal programs -- ESEA Title I, to mention just one -- the NDN does not have a powerful and recognized constituency. However, as the national emphasis on economy and reliance on local initiative increases, the NDN's basic operating tenets, which emphasize local planning and selection, and its guiding principle -- that demonstrably successful programs should be made as widely available as possible -- speak loudly to its credit.

Assuming that ways will be found to ensure the continued existence of the NDN, what other questions must be answered? For one, how many of the projects comprising the NDN are to be supported for dissemination and at what level? The answer to this question becomes more important as the number of JDRP-approved projects increases, especially if the Congress authorizes no increase in the funding level for the full network. In that case, which tack will be more effective: to fund for dissemination more projects at lower levels -- increasing the diversity of offerings but decreasing the range of activities that each project can undertake -- or to fund fewer projects, increasing the activities in which each can engage but effectively curtailing the variety of programs available for adoption? Should projects be funded for only a limited time in order to spread the

available money around? What effect should the question of funding level and spread have on the laudable desire to encourage more projects to apply for JDRP approval?

There is another question of emphasis that is related to funding. To justify their eligibility for NDN dissemination funds, projects must obtain adoptions. Numbers count. At the same time, service is also an NDN expectation -- service to the adopter so that implementation of a program at the adopter's site will proceed smoothly and successfully. However, because of limited funds, many projects are obliged to limit the follow-up services they provide in the interest of seeking still more adoptions. Facilitators are faced with a similar dilemma. With no increase in their budgets and staffs, they are expected to expand awareness of what the NDN can offer and help schools to analyze their problems while maintaining contact with the ever-growing numbers of adopters in their states.

Further, both Developer/Demonstrators and Facilitators are required to evaluate the quality of the adoptions they have obtained and to document how effective each adoption is. These activities require still more expenditures of time and money that otherwise could be devoted to service to adopters. Although these are policy dilemmas for the federal sponsoring agency, ultimately the way out depends on money.

The effects of rapid growth raise further questions. In 1974 the NDN was an infant network comprising 32 Developer/Demonstrators and Facilitators in 31 states. Those few people all knew each other by their first names and worked with and for each other. Now, with hundreds of projects all over the country, it is much more difficult for people to stay in close touch, to know each other well, and to work together closely. More growth and still greater diversity could lead to less spirit, less effectiveness, and ultimately less power.

Growth and recognition of the NDN have led in some cases to demand that exceeds supply. Developer/Demonstrator projects that have been especially successful with their dissemination activities or whose programs are in content areas with relatively few offerings are sometimes unable to answer all the requests they receive for demonstration and training.

To respond to the tendency to lose touch and to counteract the negative aspects of growth, NDN projects have begun to form subnetworks that have some kind of mutual interest, whether of content, method, audience, or geography. For example, several Facilitators working with scattered rural schools may help each other and exchange ideas. Projects within a single metropolitan area may offer adopter training for each other's programs. In addition, to an increasing degree Developer/Demonstrators are designating successful adopters as demonstration sites and certifying trainers across the country. This trend speaks to a variety of needs. When a project is housed, as it were, in more than one location, travel costs can be reduced, wear and tear on the Developer/Demonstrator staff can be reduced, and follow-up services to adopters can be maintained or even augmented. At the same time, however, new demands are made on the project staff to recruit, select, train, and monitor the trainers. The challenge to the NDN is to make this dissemination technique

work. Although other systems have been carrying out similar experiments, none has been as extensive. The NDN's experience with certified trainers will undoubtedly be documented and will be able to serve as a model for others.

One of the most intriguing questions before the NDN at the moment is the ultimate effect of the new requirement that all JDRP-approved projects must resubmit four years after the date of original approval if they wish to remain in the NDN. What will be the effects of this requirement? For some projects, the data originally presented to the JDRP represented several years of evaluation and the expenditure of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of dollars. Will many projects drop out rather than go to the trouble and expense of collecting, analyzing, and presenting new data to substantiate claims of effectiveness? If they do drop out, will the effect be one of removing dead wood or will it be a loss of vitality? Will the NDN document what dropout projects have learned and pass it on to projects new to the network? What will be the effect on adopters of dropouts, especially on adopters that are not yet well established?

The answers to some of these questions will be found in the next several months. Others will emerge only as the NDN continues to evolve. However, it is clear that the National Diffusion Network has made a real contribution to the understanding of how change for the good can occur in schools and of what is required to support the positive effects of change. NDN processes have helped thousands of school people and students across the country, and NDN experiences should benefit educational researchers and students of educational change as well.

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